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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000256

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PRE-TALKS PREPARATIONS, POSTURING
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Classified By: CDA JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Ambassador's meetings with the three Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) Ministers who will participate in talks on the Ceasefire Agreement in Geneva February 22-23 indicate that the new Rajapaksa government is diligently preparing for its first face-to-face with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). While preparations continue behind the scenes, however, both parties' pre-talks public relations campaigns seem to be in full swing, with each side trying to burnish its human rights image and pro-peace posture before Geneva. Much of this posturing seems targeted at the international community, whose pressure and influence are widely credited with bringing the LTTE to the table. End summary.

THE PREPARATIONS:
MINISTERS HEADING FOR GENEVA
SEEM FOCUSED, OPEN-MINDED

[1](#)2. (C) Ambassador's discussions with Health Minister and Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) head of delegation Nimal Siripala de Silva (Ref B), and delegation members Trade Minister Jeyaraj Fenandopoulle and Investment Minister Rohitha Bogollagama indicate that President Rajapaksa's new GSL team is making extensive preparations for its first official engagement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)--the February 22-23 talks in Geneva on the ceasefire. In a February 14 meeting, the Tamil-speaking Fernandopoulle, who last met LTTE chief negotiator Anton Balasingham in

Jaffna in 1990, emphasized that legitimate Tamil grievances should not be overshadowed by GSL anger over LTTE actions. In a briefing for the diplomatic corps earlier the same day, Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera (who will not be heading to Geneva), kept expectations modest, acknowledging to the assembled envoys that the most the GSL realistically hopes for from the talks is agreement on timing and venue for a second round of dialogue. (Note: We have heard the same comment from other GSL sources, as well as from the Swiss Embassy hosts of the talks.)

13. (C) In a February 16 meeting, Investment Minister Rohitha Bogollagama, who has been named GSL delegation press spokesman, told the Ambassador and DCM that the GSL's stand would be "accommodating, but not compromising." Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa (the President's younger

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brother) also participated in the meeting. The Ambassador urged Bogollagama to help ensure that the GSL delegation not focus merely on legalistic aspects of upholding the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA)--e.g., whether or not the Karuna faction falls under the section of the CFA dealing with paramilitaries--but look instead at ways to build confidence and keep the LTTE engaged and at the table. The indisputable drop-off in killings committed by either the LTTE or the Karuna faction since the announcement of talks on January 25 demonstrates that both sides have the ability to reduce the violence, the Ambassador commented, if they wish to. (Note: The Defense Secretary, interestingly enough, did not respond with the customary denials of GSL involvement with Karuna; he only smiled.) The GSL knows merely reciting LTTE violations of the CFA is not an adequate strategy, Bogollagama stressed; instead, the government will attempt to make the LTTE a "stakeholder" in the process to encourage continued

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participation in dialogue. Bogollagama added that current plans are to keep the press sequestered apart from the talks venue in Geneva and to reserve comments to the press (which he assumes he and Balasingham will offer together) for the end of each day.

SWISS SEE GSL AS "SERIOUS BUT NAIVE";
LTTE AS INSINCERE AND NOT NAIVE

14. (C) In a February 15 meeting with poloff, Swiss emboff Martin Sturzinger discussed logistical preparations for the upcoming talks. While the LTTE had announced the members of its delegation as early as February 2 and delivered the passports shortly thereafter to the Swiss for visas, the GSL keeps changing the composition of its delegation (the latest tally is 26--more than twice the number of the LTTE team), he noted. Travel arrangements for the Tigers (which are being handled by the Norwegians) have been logistically challenging, Sturzinger said, because of the need to ensure that the flight not transit any EU nations. (Note: While there is no official EU travel ban on the LTTE, many Sri Lankans believe there is, and there is an obvious desire on the part of the Norwegians not to unnecessarily inflame Sinhalese chauvinist sentiments already riled by the Swiss venue.) The LTTE delegation will arrive in Geneva February 18 via Dubai, Sturzinger said, and have a few days of meetings before the talks begin. After talks conclude, they will travel to Oslo (according to Sturzinger, the Norwegian Embassy is issuing a "Norway Only" visa, instead of the more usual "Schengen visa," which would allow the LTTE to travel to other Schengen Agreement countries in Europe) and on to Iceland. (Note: Iceland is a contributor to the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM).) Swiss Ambassador Bernardino Ragazzoni will attend the talks as an "observer."

15. (C) Sturzinger said he believes the GSL is "serious but naive" about the impending talks, while the LTTE is "serious

(but not sincere) and not naive." The Swiss official, who is in regular contact with LTTE members, said he questioned the Tiger leadership's motives in pursuing talks, adding that he sees evidence of a rift between the political and military wings' approaches to the peace process. Fear that the usual LTTE interlocutors--especially political wing leader Thamilchelvan--were not accurately passing messages back to Prabhakaran had prompted the Norwegian Embassy's insistence that the LTTE supremo himself meet with Development Minister Erik Solheim during his last visit to Sri Lanka (Ref D), Sturzinger indicated. Tiger attacks against the military in December and January could only mean that the LTTE, for whatever reason, was trying to provoke a return to war, he argued; why else take the chance with an inexperienced and untested government? Only international pressure--he specifically credited a highly publicized speech by Ambassador Lunstead on January 10--forced the Tigers back to the table, he theorized.

¶6. (C) Sturzinger said he knew from well-placed sources that the "LTTE was not happy" with the media blitz conducted by the Tiger-affiliated Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) about the alleged abductions of staff members in late January (Ref C). The LTTE had apparently let the TRO know it should turn off the hype, which, he noted, the Tiger-linked charity had. (Comment: This last is true. After churning out press releases and calling us on a near-hourly basis, the TRO has dropped off the radar over the past 10 days.)

AND THE POSTURING: WAR OF WORDS OVER
CHILDREN, HOME AND MOTHER(LAND)

¶7. (SBU) While internal preparations for the talks continue,
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both sides are mounting respective propaganda battles that seem primarily intended to win the hearts and minds of the international community. Apart from trading accusations about the alleged TRO abductions, the two parties are using the emotionally charged topic of child recruitment to score public relations points. The LTTE spun one comparatively anodyne sentence (that the average rate of child recruitment had declined over the past six months) in a February 14 statement by UNICEF Representative JoAnna Van Gerpen, which was otherwise critical of the Tigers, into exaggerated praise of Tiger progress in addressing child recruitment. The GSL counter-attacked, using a nationalist English newspaper's lead story on February 15 to trumpet unnamed critics' description of the UNICEF statement as "pretty lame."

¶8. (U) The LTTE also seized on statements made by President Mahinda Rajapaksa in a February 13 interview with Reuters in which he described Tiger demands for "a separate state" as "completely out." On February 15 the LTTE political wing issued a press statement accusing Rajapaksa of having "totally rejected the Tamil homeland concept," which it characterized as one of the three fundamental principles "guiding the LTTE in its struggle to find a peacefully negotiated political arrangement to (sic) the Tamil people." The statement went on to lambaste "Sinhala rulers" for living "in a dream psychosis. . . . The Tamil people opted for a separate state only because their call for resolution of their national problem on the basis of federalism was rejected. . . . If the Mahinda regime adopts a political stand ruling out the Tamil homeland concept and insists on a resolution of the racial conflict within the unitary constitution, the LTTE would be left with no alternative other than to endeavor hard to respond effectively to the Tamil call for self-rule." The obligatory GSL riposte appeared on government's official website the following day, accusing the LTTE's Tamil website of mischaracterizing the President's rejection of a separate state as a rejection of a "motherland for Tamils."

INVESTIGATIONS, INCIDENTS

¶9. (C) On February 13 12 Special Task Force (STF) personnel, including one police Inspector, were taken in for questioning by the Criminal Investigative Department (CID) regarding the January 2 killings of five students in the eastern district of Trincomalee (Ref E). CID Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Asoka Wijetilleka told RSO on February 16 that investigations are proceeding, even though results from ballistics tests had not yet been provided to the police. At a briefing for the diplomatic corps on February 14, Inspector General of Police Chandra Fernando told envoys that the TRO was not cooperating with GSL efforts to investigate the alleged abductions (Ref C). The IGP complained that of the 13 purported eyewitnesses, only two had given statements to CID--one of whom refused even to give her name.

¶10. (SBU) Since the January 25 announcement that talks would take place in Geneva, the tit-for-tat violence that had been commonplace for almost two years and the LTTE attacks on the military that plagued December and January seem to have ceased almost completely. Besides the alleged TRO abductions, the one exception has been a February 11 incident in which Sri Lanka Navy (SLN) sailors attempted to board a suspected LTTE Sea Tiger vessel off the coast of the northwestern district of Mannar. According to local press reports, the occupants of the vessel set off a grenade after SLN sailors boarded. The vessel reportedly caught fire and sank. Four suspected LTTE Sea Tigers and one SLN sailor were killed in the incident. The LTTE has since denied the vessel was theirs. (See septel IIR on this subject.)

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COMMENT

¶11. (C) Rajapaksa's government has sometimes been criticized for lacking the intellectual heft of the Wickremesinghe government--the last to engage the Tigers directly in talks. Our discussions with GSL representatives over the past few weeks, however, indicate that Rajapaksa's team is striving to prepare itself thoroughly for this important opportunity. Even the most thorough preparations may not be enough, however, if, as many suspect, the LTTE is not sincerely interested in strengthening the ceasefire. Both parties are acutely aware of international interest in the talks--especially the LTTE, for whom the international community is the only constituency whose opinion matters. Sustaining international attention in the talks, while maintaining a stance flexible enough to keep the Tigers at the table but strong enough not to elicit Sinhalese charges of appeasement (to be "accommodating but not compromising," in Bogollagama's words) remain the GSL's twin challenges.

ENTWISTLE